

Israel, Turkey, and the Contest for Syria

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Post-Assad Syria has become the primary theater in which competing visions for the region's future are being tested. Israel's August 18, 2026, [strike](#) against the Abu al-Duhur airbase hours after a Turkish delegation departed the facility crystallized the collision now shaping Syria's trajectory: Turkish efforts to build a permanent military foothold against Israel's need for aerial freedom, in a contest over which power will fill the vacuum Iran left in the Levant.

Turkey is not, however, the only external power seeking to shape post-Assad Syria. Saudi Arabia has moved with comparable speed, if through different instruments, to establish itself as a principal stakeholder in Syria's reconstruction and political reorientation. Riyadh's ultimate objective is the reintegration of Syria into the Arab state system under Gulf — and specifically Saudi — leadership, an objective that indeed aligns with Turkey's on the immediate question of ending Iranian influence but diverges on the longer-term question of who anchors the post-Iran order in the Levant and how much autonomy Damascus retains within it.

Turkish hegemony over Syria would be a strategic loss for the United States and it is a U.S. interest to prevent it. The alignment and latent competition between Turkey and Saudi Arabia that offers a way out. American interests are best served by diversifying the external coalition rebuilding Syria, giving Saudi Arabia a greater role in rebuilding the Syrian state and military, which denies Ankara that hegemony without forcing a confrontation between American allies.

Turkey's Strategy in Syria

Turkey's interest in shaping Syria is not new. Before the civil war, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan [cultivated](#) Bashar al-Assad as a junior partner. When that relationship collapsed in 2011 over his sponsorship of Arab Spring Islamists, Ankara became the principal external supporter of the Syrian opposition. The fall of Assad's government in December 2024 gave Turkey the opportunity to convert a decade of investment in Syria's opposition into lasting influence over a new Syrian state.

Turkey's ambitions in Syria have four dimensions, in descending order of strategic necessity. The first, and the least negotiable, is the elimination of Kurdish autonomous military capacity along Turkey's southern border, a domestic-security imperative that transcends any particular government or ideology. Turkey's Defense Minister Yasar Guler [confirmed](#) in February 2026 that Ankara considers its Syrian deployments to create a buffer zone from the Turkish border permanent, and treats this as formal policy.

The second is the construction of a security system in which Syria's military is dependent on Turkish military capacity. Turkey is the primary engine rebuilding Syria's armed forces. Israeli [assessments](#) indicate that Turkey intends to supply al-Sharaa's forces with unmanned aerial vehicles, air defense systems, and precision munitions. The airbase rehabilitation program—T4, Hama, Abu al-Duhur—aims to establish forward-deployed Turkish air assets and reconstitute a Syrian air force integrated with Turkish command structures. Turkey does not need these capabilities to fight the PKK. It needs them to project power into the Levant and to contest the aerial dominance that has defined Israeli operations over Syria for decades.

The third is Turkey's aspiration, predating the current vacuum, to be a regional great power. Iran's collapse in the Levant has created the opportunity. Erdogan has [framed](#) Turkey's military buildup as a "major leap forward" and a "historic opportunity" to convert military achievements into lasting strategic gains. Syria gives Turkey something it has lacked since the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire: a bridge into the Arab political system. Turkey's influence extends beyond the military sphere. Ankara has deployed teachers to Syrian [schools](#) and Syrian textbooks are being rewritten to remove negative references to Turkey and rehabilitate the Ottoman past.

Fourth comes economic integration. The Gaziantep-Aleppo commercial axis, the planned Hejaz Railway, and the Kirkuk-Baniyas oil pipeline would position Syria at the center of a new regional logistics network with Turkey as its northern anchor. Turkey also needs an economically stable Syria to absorb the return of millions of Syrian refugees currently in Turkey, and Turkish construction firms stand to benefit substantially from reconstruction contracts.

If Turkey succeeds across these four dimensions, it will possess an extraordinary position: Iraq on one side, Syria deeply integrated on the other, military footholds extending through Qatar, Somalia, and Libya, commercial access into the Gulf, and close strategic coordination with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

Israel's Strategic Calculus

It is the airbase program that brings Turkey's strategy into direct conflict with Israel's. Israel's core strategic interest in Syria has been consistent since the eruption of the Syrian civil war: freedom of aerial operation over Syrian territory. Under Assad, this enabled the disruption of Iranian weapons transfers to Hezbollah. After Assad's fall, Israel destroyed the residual Syrian military to prevent any successor government from reconstituting a conventional threat. Since October 7, Israel's posture toward its northern borders has fundamentally changed, and Israel now views the Golan Heights as a potential staging ground for cross-border attacks.

The [Nagel Committee](#), established on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's directive in January 2025, defined the Turkish threat as a "new and significant danger" and warned that a Syrian government functioning as a Turkish proxy could "increase the risk of a direct Turkish-Israeli confrontation." The security challenge Turkey presents is categorically different from the one Iran posed. Turkey is a NATO member with the alliance's second-largest conventional military and the institutional capacity to forward-deploy and sustain military forces indefinitely. Turkey is also in the process of a [major modernization](#) of its air force: 40 new F-16 Block 70 Vipers are on order from the United States and 20 new-build Eurofighter Typhoon Tranche 4 aircraft are in production in the United Kingdom. If Turkey deploys Hisar air-defense batteries and unmanned aerial systems into Syria, it would raise the costs of Israeli operations and end the aerial freedom that Israel has maintained since Russia's withdrawal of its air-defense umbrella. Former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's characterization of Turkey as "the [new Iran](#)" captures the Israeli view: both represent hostile states building military infrastructure in Syria that constrains Israeli deterrence. Turkey, however, does so from an incomparably stronger conventional position.

Israel has [established](#) two explicit red lines: the establishment of a permanent Turkish base south of Damascus, and the deployment of advanced Turkish anti-aircraft systems anywhere in Syria that could project power toward Israeli territory and interfere with Israeli air operations. The "campaign between wars" doctrine, originally developed for degrading Iranian and Hezbollah capabilities through persistent, calibrated strikes, is now being applied to Turkish military infrastructure.

Simultaneously, Israel is pursuing a diplomatic track aimed at separating al-Sharaa from Erdogan. [Reuters reported](#) that Mossad chief Roman Gofman spoke directly with Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani on August 14, four days before the Abu al-Duhur strike, specifically about Turkey's military presence. Al-Shaibani's [statement](#) to *Axios* following the Abu al-Duhur strike that "there was no intention to establish a Turkish base" and that the facility was being rehabilitated for the Syrian Air Force simultaneously reassured Israel and preserved the Turkish training relationship. The Israeli bet seems to be that al-Sharaa values his relationship with Washington more than unconditional alignment with Ankara, and that each strike increases his incentive to restrain Turkish ambitions.

The fundamental question now is whether Israel's doctrine of aerial freedom can be compatible with any reconstitution of Syrian military capacity, Turkish-assisted or otherwise. Al-Sharaa cannot govern a sovereign state that lacks the minimal requirements of military self-defense. If Israel's red lines prevent Syria from acquiring or operating air-defense systems from any source, Israel is effectively claiming a permanent veto over Syrian sovereignty that makes al-Sharaa's Western-facing strategy irrelevant to Israeli operational calculus—a strategy that Washington is encouraging and that differentiates the current Syrian government from its predecessor.

The Problem for the United States

The strategic problem for the United States in Syria is that Turkey is positioned to fill the vacuum Iran left in the Levant. The U.S. interest is to support a cooperative, moderate, and sovereign Syria that poses neither security threats nor power projection opportunity to its neighbors and thus disrupt the hegemonic competition that has been destabilizing the region. A Turkish hegemony extending from Iraq through Syria, with footholds in Qatar, Libya, and Somalia and a collective defense pact binding it to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, would constitute a regional power center outside American direction, led by a government with a readiness to challenge a core American interest in the security of Israel and a record of sponsoring the Islamist movements that Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Cairo treat as threats. Turkey's NATO membership compounds the problem, because the alliance limits Washington's leverage over Ankara, and the F-16 Block 70 aircraft modernizing the Turkish Air Force are on order from the United States.

The collision with Israel follows from this. Turkish military expansion in Syria is placing forward-deployed assets and defense infrastructure on a trajectory that Israel treats as an existential threat to its aerial freedom of action. Exclusive Turkish patronage over Syria's military would give Ankara disproportionate leverage over Syrian policy on questions where Turkish and American interests diverge — Israel's security, Kurds, and the management of Islamist relationships. Damascus currently faces a choice between vulnerability to Israeli strikes and dependence on Turkish protection, and every Israeli strike risks deepening Syria's reliance on the only power willing and able to rebuild its military. The result is the Turkish monopoly over Syria's security sector that Israeli strikes are ostensibly intended to prevent. Israeli strikes can cap Turkish deployments, but denying Ankara hegemony over Syria requires a second patron for Syrian state-building whose engagement Israel can tolerate, and one is already present.

Saudi Arabia as the Second Patron

Riyadh's interest in Syria has a long history. The kingdom backed opposition factions throughout the civil war and competed with both Iran and Qatar for influence over the rebels' political direction, and the fall of Assad and the simultaneous weakening of Iran have given Saudi Arabia its first realistic chance to draw Damascus into the Gulf orbit since the Ba'athist coup of 1963.

Today, Saudi Arabia's interest in Syria differs substantially from Turkey's. Where Ankara seeks to build Syrian dependence on Turkish military capacity, Riyadh seeks Syria's reintegration into the Arab state system—a restoration of Arab order in which Damascus returns to the Gulf-centered political and economic framework from which it was severed during the Assad-Iran period. Syria has been ruled by an Alawite minority, a Shiite offshoot, under the name of the Ba'ath party for over half a century. This made it a natural ally for Iran and Hezbollah. Its reintegration into the Arab fold is a prize precisely because it is Arab. If Syria passes from Iranian non-Arab patronage to Turkish non-Arab patronage, the sectarian problem is solved but the problem of a non-Arab power dominating an Arab state remains. For Riyadh, Turkish hegemony over Syria is a different kind of loss than Iranian hegemony, but it is still a loss.

Riyadh acted on this interest immediately after the fall of Assad. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan traveled to Damascus on January 24, 2025, the first high-level visit by a Saudi official following the ouster of al-Assad. In the same month Saudi Arabia hosted the [Riyadh meetings](#) on Syria, the first major international gathering on post-Assad reconstruction. Riyadh also played a central role in lobbying Washington to lift Caesar Act sanctions.

In February 2026, Saudi Arabia [signed](#) approximately \$5.3 billion in investment deals with Damascus, the largest package from any single country since Assad's fall, committing to a \$2 billion fund for phased modernization of two international airports in Aleppo, a \$1 billion project to build a fiber-optic network, and a \$1.5 billion "Syria Without Camps" [initiative](#) to dismantle displacement camps and fund returnee housing.

Saudi Arabia is also a co-sponsor of the Hejaz Railway redevelopment, which positions the kingdom as a major stakeholder in Syria's infrastructure. Leading with economic infrastructure creates dependencies that are harder to reverse than military deployments, locks Syria's economic orientation toward the Gulf, and gives Riyadh institutional leverage over the Syrian economy.

Saudi Arabia's military engagement with Syria has been comparatively modest. The kingdom does not maintain forces in Syria and has not proposed to do so. Its defense relationship with Damascus takes the form of officer training, defense-show participation, and advisory work—substantial in potential but thin in current weight compared to Turkey's permanent military presence. This asymmetry is the central fact of the patron competition in Syria: Turkey's claim to primacy rests on a specific capability Riyadh has not matched.

Damascus is itself seeking a second patron. Al-Sharaa chose Saudi Arabia, not Turkey, for his first official foreign visit—a signal that Damascus would not be a Turkish satellite. The skills he is deploying at the state level were developed during Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) years of survival in Idlib, where the organization learned to manage Turkish patronage without surrendering operational autonomy. A June [decree](#) permitting foreign investors full ownership rights, profit repatriation, and extensive tax concessions places licensing authority directly under institutions tied to the presidency. This is the institutional architecture of patron management: it allows al-Sharaa to offer different patrons access to different sectors, preventing any single external actor from dominating the reconstruction economy. Al-Sharaa's balancing act can hold as long as no patron forces a binary choice.

The Saudi-Turkish Alignment and Its Limits

Turkey and Saudi Arabia are simultaneously allies and competitors in Syria—aligned on displacing Iranian influence, divided on what replaces it. Whether Riyadh can serve as that second patron depends on which of the two prevails.

The alignment in Syria functions through a division of labor: Turkey provides military and institutional capacity; Saudi Arabia provides reconstruction capital and diplomatic weight. Both governments support al-Sharaa and have coordinated on lobbying Washington to lift Syria sanctions. On August 7, eleven days before the Abu al-Duhur strike, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan [signed](#) the Mecca Joint Defense Agreement, establishing a collective defense commitment in which an armed attack on any signatory would be treated as an attack on all three. The agreement, in theory, serves as an aspirational deterrent framework, combining Turkish defense-industrial capability, Saudi financial resources, and, ambiguously, Pakistan's nuclear deterrent. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan has [stated](#) that the pact should expand.

This alignment, however, defers the question of regional hegemonic competition. The Saudi-Turkish rivalry over leadership of the Sunni world predates the current rapprochement by decades. Erdogan's ruling party has historical ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, which Riyadh still treats as a domestic security threat. In Syria specifically, the two visions are compatible only up to a point: the Saudis are seeking a restoration and reintegration of Arab order, while Turkey is seeking Syrian dependence.

But Saudi Arabia's strategic calculus in Syria is not fixed. In a moment of Iranian decline, active Israeli forward defense, and eroding confidence in American guarantees, whatever competitive advantage Riyadh derives from Turkish military setbacks in Syria is subordinate to containing Israel as it increasingly becomes a disruptive part of the regional balance-of-power. Should the Iranian threat reconsolidate, or Turkish ambitions in Syria begin encroaching on Saudi interests, the competitive dynamic reasserts itself.

Saudi engagement is categorically different from Turkish forward-basing of combat aircraft and air-defense batteries. It takes the form of officer education, advisory capacity, and defense-industrial cooperation. This may address Syrian needs and Israeli concerns. The latent competition gives Riyadh a standing reason to deepen that role if Washington encourages it, and gives al-Sharaa a reason to welcome it. The Mecca Agreement constrains Saudi policy toward Ankara while leaving Saudi state-building in Damascus untouched.

Policy Recommendations

Saudi aspirations in Syria align with American strategic objectives. The Saudi vision draws Damascus into the economic and political framework that Washington already manages through its existing Gulf partnerships. Saudi reconstruction investment underwrites stabilization at no cost to the American taxpayer. Accelerating Saudi engagement in Syria, particularly in the security sector where it is currently thinnest, extends American influence into a theater where Washington has had no cooperative Syrian government in decades. A Syria with diversified external partnerships is a Syria where Washington can engage Damascus directly rather than through Ankara. Al-Sharaa's multi-patron balancing strategy preserves that direct channel, and preserving his room for maneuver should be understood as a policy objective.

These interests converge on a single policy: diversifying the external coalition rebuilding Syria. Diversification is simultaneously the mechanism for denying Turkey hegemony over Syria without a Turkish-Israeli collision, for extending Saudi and Arab engagement deeper into Syria's security sector, and for preserving al-Sharaa's balancing act. American policy should break the feedback loop in which each Israeli strike deepens Syrian dependence on Turkey.

First, the United States should establish clear parameters for Syrian military reconstitution that distinguish between defensive capabilities consistent with sovereignty and power-projection capabilities that would alter the regional balance. A Syria with functioning border-security forces is in America's interest;

a Syria with Turkish-operated air-defense systems capable of denying Israeli overflight is not. These parameters should be communicated simultaneously to Damascus, Ankara, and Jerusalem.

Second, the United States should encourage greater Arab participation in Syrian military education, institutional development, and state-building, led by Saudi Arabia and supplemented by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, and Jordan. Already in October 2025, Syrian Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra [announced](#) that officer cadets were being dispatched to military academies in Saudi Arabia as well as Turkey. The UAE is already commercially engaged in Syria: DP World has [secured](#) a concession to build and operate infrastructure at Syria's second-largest port. Abu Dhabi's conspicuous absence from the Mecca Agreement creates an additional node for diversification that is not embedded in the Turkish-led defense framework. What is currently a set of incidental facts should become a coordinated policy.

Third, the United States should formalize a trilateral Israeli-Syrian-American framework for managing Syrian military reconstitution, giving Israel institutional means to communicate and address security requirements without relying exclusively on kinetic action. Such a mechanism preserves Israeli security while giving al-Sharaa the political space to manage his external relationships and build the sovereign capacity that all parties other than Iran have an interest in seeing Damascus acquire.

The resulting American strategy is: Syrian sovereignty without Turkish monopoly; Turkish participation without Turkish hegemony; Israeli security without permanent Syrian incapacitation; and Arab engagement elevated to a strategic instrument for diversifying Syria's external partnerships. This framework gives al-Sharaa the diversified patronage base he is already seeking, gives Ankara a role proportionate to its contribution, gives Israel a Syria oriented toward multiple Western-aligned partners rather than a single antagonistic patron, and gives Washington a policy architecture that aligns its stated objectives with its operational tools.